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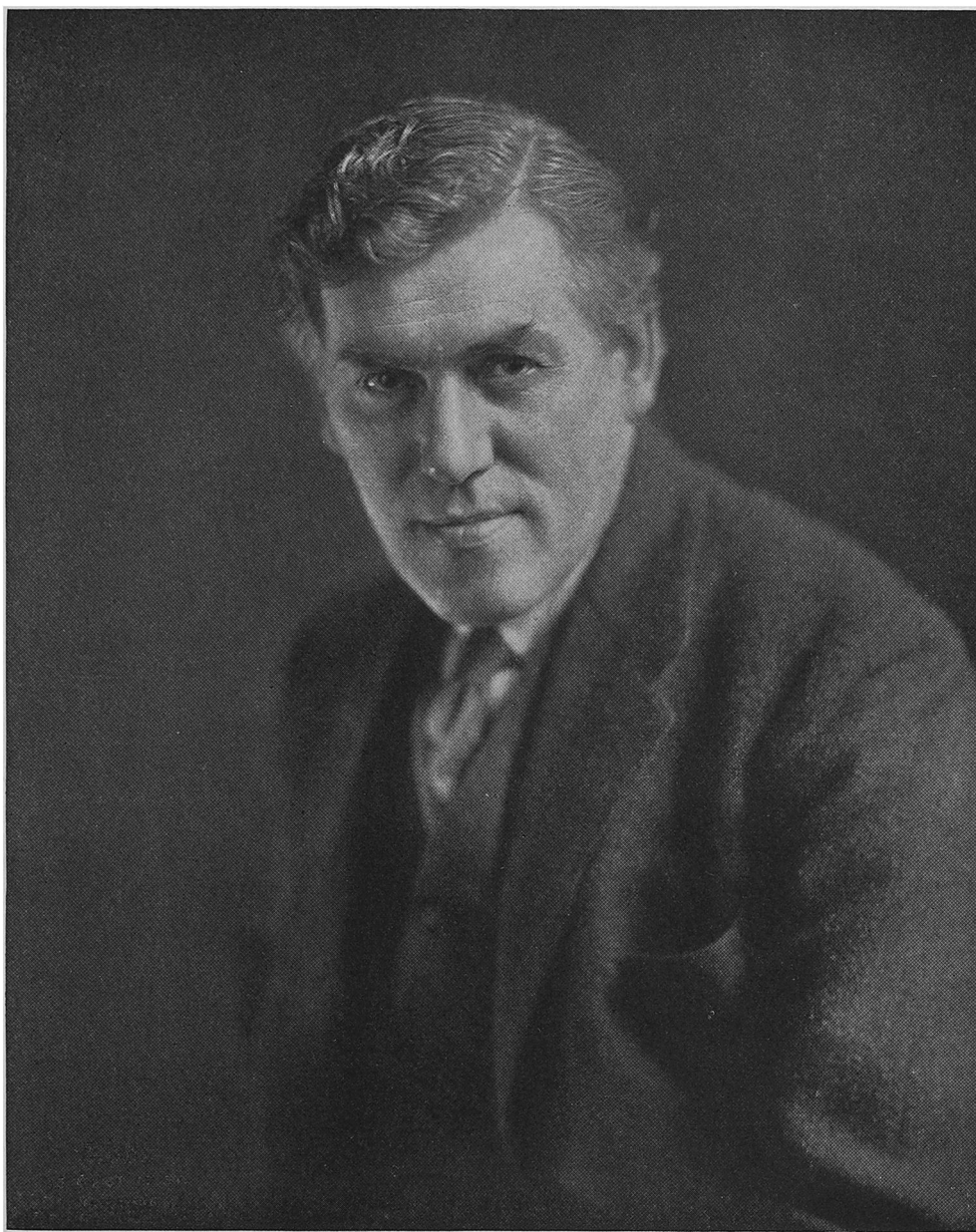
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E. LYALL SWETE, WHO PLAYS THE TITLE RÔLE IN MAETERLINCK'S
"A BURGOMASTER OF BELGIUM," BELMONT THEATRE, NEW YORK

MOLIÈRE TO MOELLER TO MILLER

By HEYWOOD BROWN

PHILIP MOELLER has dared a grave danger in devising his play "Molière" and he has come through safely, we think, but certainly not unscathed. It is generally held that an author can do as he pleases with his characters as long as they are his own. There is, as far as we know, not an organization in the world for the prevention of cruelty to puppets. But only let the author christen his puppets after famous men and women and his immunity at once disappears. The dramatist who dares to put Washington into a play, for instance, will find that the city is filled with scores and scores of people who seem to have been on the most intimate terms with the Father of his Country. Inaccuracies in dress, deportment, character, and career, as pictured in the play, will be reported from every side.

But Molière is not as well-known hereabouts as Washington. This may have given Moeller a false sense of security. Certainly if he had any sense of security it was ill founded for since the production of the play at the Liberty Theatre friends of Molière have been popping up on every side to correct various phases of the character as depicted by Moeller. To some extent these criticisms are fair and inevitable. Although, it is true that the average theatregoer may well be assumed to have no exact knowledge of the facts of Molière's life it is at least possible that he has heard of him as a writer of great comedies. Mr. Average Spectator therefore is apt to rebel a bit when he finds the Molière of Moeller a

grim and saturnine man with apparently not a trace of humor about him. This would seem to be false in spirit as well as in fact. Of course, the playwright may defend himself on the ground that the Molière he pictures is a man deep in trouble. It is also necessary for the playwright to emphasize the austerity of the man in order that he may play a proper Joseph in the big scene of the play. But beyond the objection to Molière's lack of humor we do not think the mass of historical criticism brought against the play is always telling. It does not seem to us very important whether Montespan actually had a passion for Molière or not and still less whether there is historical authority for the presence of the King at the death of the dramatist.

In fact even the one grave flaw in spirit which we have noted is not enough to impair the charm of the play seriously. Mr. Moeller has found the public of New York at a moment when it is at least receptive to romance and he has provided opportunities for beautiful costumes and setting and a bit of rant and bombast for the actors to go with their silks and laces. The play has much less humor than most of Moeller's former ventures in the theatre, but it is infinitely more exciting and occasionally it strikes a genuine note of pathos. From a dramatic point of view much the best scene occurs in the second act when Molière has the courage not only to spurn the advances of Mme. de Montespan but also to proclaim his indifference to the literary taste of his King and patron. Molière's big speech contains more

than a hint of having been written after the fact. Indeed one almost expects him to say something about making the world safe for democracy. However, even if the speech is not wholly in character it is at least a rousing bit of theatricalism.

The rôle of Molière falls to Henry Miller who is exceedingly good in the interpretation of some phases of the character and not so good in others. He is, for instance, neither forceful enough nor distinct enough in his defiance of the King, but the third act in which Molière dies is superlatively well done throughout. Much the finest performance in the play is given by Blanche Bates in the rôle of Mme. de Montespan. This splendid actress who has been seen only rarely on the stage in the last few seasons thrilled her audience by her ability to play for both shading and power. She could make Montespan coo and she could make her rage when occasion demanded. Many of the successes scored by Miss Bates several seasons ago were in romantic plays such as "The Darling of the Gods" and "The Girl of the Golden West," and now with romance apparently in flood again she still holds her leadership in this school of acting. Miss Bates is able to play romantic rôles with enough lift to make them appealing and at the same time keep enough suggestion of reality to make them convincing.

After seeing "A Burgomaster of Belgium" it seems a great pity that Maeterlinck did not secure a contract at the beginning of hostilities empowering him to write all the war plays. He does the job much better than any of his predecessors who have shown their wares hereabouts. Not only is his technical skill greater but his point of view is clearer. There is less hysteria in his play than any of the others and yet there is no lack of forceful indictment against Germany. His play suffers

very distinctly from the fact that he is covering ground over which our dramatists have fought incessantly for the last two seasons. It is hard to thrill and to suffer in the mind over the Belgian campaign as it was a year ago. Even true things lose their savor from constant repetition.

While it is true that Maeterlinck tells his story better than the rest it is a difference in degree. He has brought nothing which is absolutely new in conception. The Maeterlinck of "The Blue Bird" is a much more towering figure in his fancies than the Maeterlinck who marshals facts for us about the invasion of Belgium.

One of the novelties of the month was seen some little distance off the beaten track, for Susan Glaspell's "Bernice" at the Provincetown Theatre in MacDougal Street was among the significant dramatic offerings of the season. This three-act play revealed the same insight into life and the same passionate eloquence of expression which have been noteworthy in other plays by Miss Glaspell, but here for the first time she proved that her gift was not solely for the one-act form. She succeeds in maintaining her theme over the longer and more difficult stretch. Occasionally, the play is somewhat slow paced, but there is a distinct tide to it just the same and at its best moments it is definitely thrilling. All the effects are gained with the simplest means and from the standpoint of the popular school of drama the play has no action since it is concerned wholly with the things which a small group are thinking about. It is an attempt, and a successful attempt, on the part of the living to reconstruct the psychology of a woman who has died. Miss Ida Rauh contributes a brilliant performance to the interpretation.